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ABSTRACT

South Carolina's response to the excellence literature of the early 1980s is called the Education Improvement Act (EIA). This act increased high school graduation requirements, required basic skills testing and standardized observation of teacher candidates, and mandated extensive competency testing and remediation of students. The EIA, like most such legislation, tends to centralize control of, and standardize, many aspects of education, including curriculum and instruction. This study examined the opinions of administrators about the effectiveness of the excellence movement in South Carolina. Participants were selected using linear systematic sampling procedures. For the principal questionnaire the return rate was 67 percent, and for superintendents the rate was 89 percent. According to findings both principals and superintendents believe that education and the quality of beginning teachers has improved. Financial support of the state elementary and secondary education programs has also improved. Control of specific areas of the educational industry has been a major element of the national debate. Responses to questions concerning how much control the state department of education has on teacher evaluation, administrator preparation, curriculum development, and responsibility for funding are reported. Morale of educators is another research area reported. The paper concludes with a note on the weaknesses in the study and a discussion of the findings. (RR)

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SOUTH CAROLINA'S EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT ACT: IS IT WORKING

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Introduction

South Carolina's response to the excellence literature of the early 80's is called the Education Improvement Act, or EIA. This act, more precisely a conglomeration of acts, increased high school graduation requirements, required basic skills testing and standardized observation of teacher candidates, and mandated extensive competency testing and remediation of students. The EIA is considered an exemplary example of excellence legislation, and authors of articles on the excellence movement often refer to South Carolina.

The EIA, like most such legislation, tends to centralize control of, and standardize, many aspects of education, including curriculum and instruction. Curriculum, for example, is significantly influenced by the standardized competency test adopted by the state. This test, called the Basic Skills Assessment Program, or BSAP, is a major component of decisions to promote or retain students, provide merit pay to teachers and incentive pay for schools, and is the graduation test for high school students. Low BSAP scores can even contribute to a declaration of district impairedness, with subsequent take-over by the state Department of Education. Because of such pressure, it goes without saying that BSAP exerts significant control over district curriculum guides.

Classroom instruction is affected by major emphases on PET and on a state-generated teacher evaluation instrument. PET training is optional for the district, but is strongly supported by the South Carolina Department of Education. Consequently, many districts have established district level positions for coordinating PET efforts. The state's teacher evaluation process, known as the Assessment of Performance in Teaching, or APT, is required for use with all student teachers and probationary teachers, and is used by many districts for continuing evaluation. It identifies 51 specific competencies that a teacher must demonstrate in a single lesson presentation. These competencies include the ability to use a stimulating technique to motivate student interest, the use of more than one instructional

approach, the use of demonstrations or examples, positive reinforcement, personalized references, and a sense of humor.

A plethora of negative reaction has accompanied the excellence movement of the last decade. Frymier (1987), in his article, "Bureaucratization and the Neutering of Teachers," epitomizes the criticism. He argued that reformers "seem to have lost sight of the centrality of teachers to education reform," (p. 9) and that policy-makers "mouth pat phrases about the importance of teachers and teaching — and then proceed to undercut teachers by creating conditions of work that blunt their enthusiasm and stifle their creativity." (p. 9) The culprit in what he called the "neutering" of teachers is centralization of authority. Cohn and DiStefano (1984) argue that the recommendations of excellence commissions are impractical and ineffective. Calls for increased standards and expectations, for example, are blunted by students who fill out increased course requirements with easy courses; and increased time devoted to the school day is ineffectively used. Deal (1984) argues that the pursuit of excellence in the U.S. runs afoul of two pitfalls. First, the generalized belief in the power of policy is fallacious. "[A]s policies, guidelines, and recommendations enter the complex reality of social institutions," he argues, "they often become less powerful than they once appeared." (p. 59) Second, educational practitioners have been buffeted for years by outside manipulation. [W]ave after wave of reform has weakened cultural values and beliefs, ...constant criticism and ridicule has eroded professional confidence,...the main avenues for survival has been to hunker down, burn out or leave." (pp. 59-60) Reform must occur from within, but outside intervention leaves educators without the spirit to accomplish such reform.

Our study examines the opinions of administrators about the effectiveness of the excellence movement in South Carolina. It is, in a way, an oblique measure of impact because it fails to directly address gains or losses in such things as student achievement. From another perspective, however, the attitudes of those charged with carrying out the mandates of

excellence is central to it effectiveness. Their perceptions both reflect the success or failure of excellence and impact that success or failure. Perhaps we are evaluating the very thing which policy-makers seem to have left out of their equations — the element which will, when all else is said and done, make or break excellence.

Research Design

This study surveyed the opinions of school principals and superintendents in South Carolina regarding that state's excellence legislation, the Education Improvement Act. Participants were selected using linear systematic sampling procedures. The names of all possible respondents were arranged alphabetically by district, and every n^{th} name selected from the resultant list. In our case, half the principals and half the superintendents were selected, thus we chose every other name from the respective lists, with the first name selected randomly from the first interval of n (= 2) names. Among principals 67% returned the questionnaire; 89% of the superintendents responded. There was no follow-up on non-returned surveys. The standard error on such a high percentage sample was not calculated, but would be quite small. Results are presented separately for principals and superintendents.

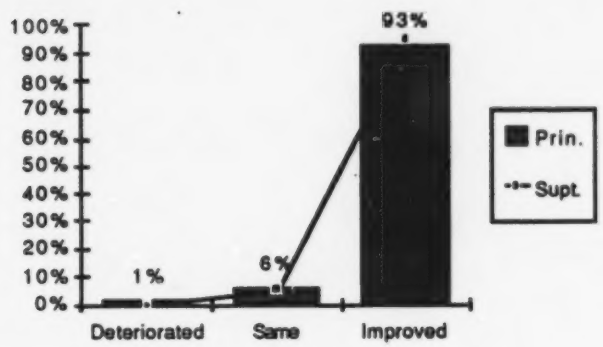
Findings

Changes Since EIA

The first question gets straight to the heart of the issue: "In your opinion has the public elementary and secondary schools of South Carolina improved, remained the same, or deteriorated since passage of the E.I.A in 1984?" The very strong impression among both principals and superintendents is that education has improved (93%), and only 1% feel it has deteriorated (Figure 1). This contrasts somewhat with the opinions of the general public. A 1988 survey, for example asked a similar question of people in western counties of the state: only 43% felt education had improved, 9% felt it had gotten worse, and 41% said it had remained the same (Marion, Kozma, & Polen, 1988, p. 4). Gallup (1990) asked

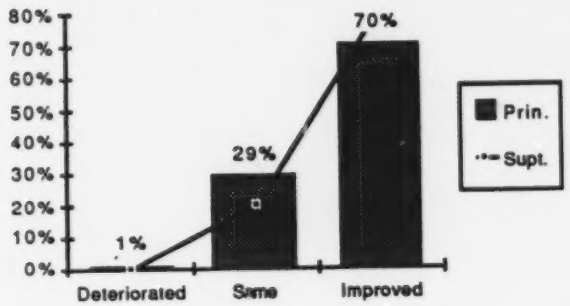
South Carolinians if education were improving, staying the same, or worsening: 56%, felt it was improving and 12% felt education was worsening.

Figure 1. In 1984 the South Carolina general assembly passed the Education Improvement Act, or E.I.A. In your opinion has the public elementary and secondary schools of South Carolina improved, remained the same, or deteriorated since passage of E.I.A. in 1984?



A series of similar questions about the state of affairs since EIA follows, and the pattern of results are similar to those reported on the general EIA question: both principals and superintendents feel that conditions have improved. We asked, for example, about the quality of beginning teachers since EIA (Figure 2). A major component of EIA legislation deals with the preparation of teachers. Today, teaching candidates must have a GPA of 2.0 and must pass a basic skills test of reading, math, and writing to enter an education major. Significant input into the content of education curricula is exercised by the state, and practice teachers must pass state-created classroom observations. Possibly because of such changes, 70% of those principals who responded, and a slightly larger number of superintendents (80%), feel that the quality of teachers had improved since 1984, while fewer than 1% report deterioration.

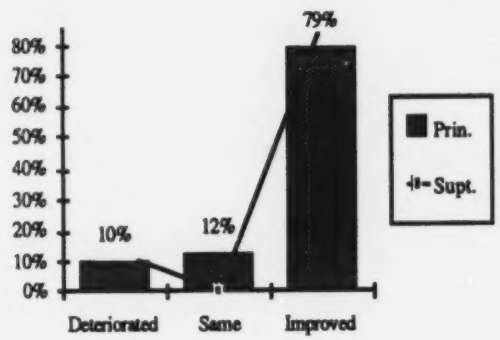
Figure 2. Since the passage of EIA in 1984, has the quality of beginning teachers employed in your school district improved, remained the same, or deteriorated.



Monetary support for education increased significantly with the passage of EIA. The state financed the excellence movement with an additional 1¢ sales tax which, in its first year, generated about $210 million dollars in new money. Revenues were earmarked, among other things, for salary increases (which are indexed against the Southeastern average), remediation of students, accelerated courses, merit pay, teacher grants, and new facilities. Problems have arisen, however. Increases in salaries and fringe benefits significantly increased the local share of the cost of education. Local districts must pay an average 30% of educational costs; as the total cost of education increased, the fixed amount local districts had to pay also increased. Salary increases were so significant — among other things, the state failed to anticipate the rapid inflation of the Southeastern index or the number of teachers who would upgrade their credentials with Master's degree — that the state itself found it difficult to maintain the commitment. Consequently the monies allocated for new facilities was severely cut, and districts found themselves having to increase local tax rates to cover the difference on facility commitments. The state further reneged on earlier commitments to pay all fringe benefit costs. On top of all this, the percent of total state revenues committed to education dropped from 27% in 1984 to 24% in 1988. Even so,

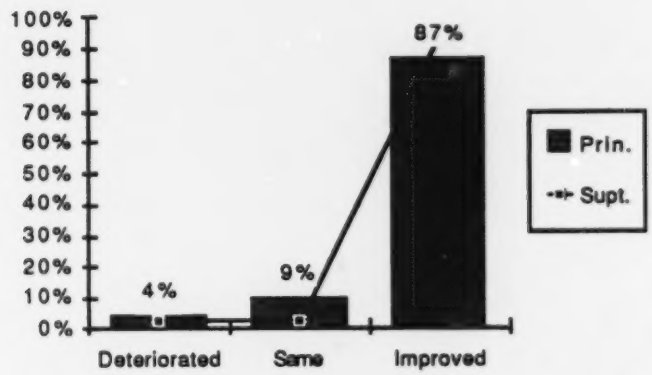
79% of the principals, and 87% of the superintendents, in the study report that the state's financial support has improved since 1984 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Has the financial support of the state for public secondary and elementary education programs improved, remained the same, or deteriorated since the passage of the EIA in 1984?



We asked if education had improved or deteriorated because of state mandated programs. Perhaps the most significant such mandate was the Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP). Given to students in grades 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 10, the BSAP is a factor in teacher and principal incentive (merit) programs, innovative grants, the retention of students, and even a declaration of district "impairedness. Consequently, BSAP is a major determinant of curricular content. Other initiatives of the state include remediation programs and programs for the gifted, advanced placement courses, adult education, and early childhood education. Eighty-seven percent of the principals who responded said that education has improved because of these programs, and only 4% claim to have witnessed deterioration (Figure 4). Among superintendents, the positive ratings increase to 95%.

Figure 4. To what extent have state mandated programs, which were a part of the EIA of 1984, and were required to be implemented by local school districts and financed by the state, affected the educational system in South Carolina? Improved, remained the same, or deteriorated.

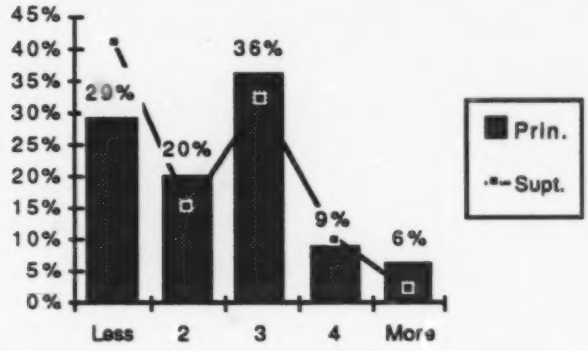


Control of Education

We asked several questions about control of specific areas of the educational industry in the state. Control has been an major element of the national debate (see, for example, Frymier, 1987); consequently, we expected administrators to call for decentralization. Such was evident in the question of teacher control. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being less control, 49% of the principals and 56% of the superintendents call for less state control in this area (Figure 5).

Figure 5. In your opinion, how much control should the state department of education exercise over the following aspects of education (scale of 1-5)?

Teacher evaluation

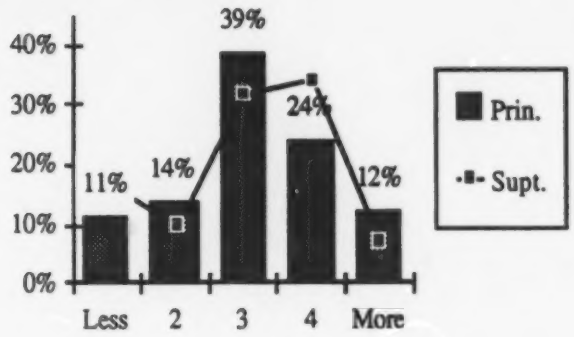


The call for decentralization was not at all evident regarding administrator preparation: only 25% of the principals and 27% of the superintendents called for less state control, while 36% of the principals and 41% of the superintendents called for more control (Figure 6). A large percentage — 39% of principals and 32% of superintendents — responded in the middle of the scale, apparently indicating that they are happy with the situation as it exists.

The relatively high percentage of those calling for more control in this area is somewhat perplexing. Currently the state mandates minimum entry requirements for university administration programs, poses stringent control over degree course requirements (11 of the 12 MEd courses at Clemson University are state prescribed), require minimum scores on the appropriate area exam of the NTE, and operate a leadership academy that all potential administrators must attend. There is some evidence that centralized control is softening (some control over certification is shifting to the universities, for example), but the impact of such movement on practitioners would be minimal. To wit, the specter of even greater state control over administrative preparation is rather mind-boggling to those of us in academia.

Figure 6. In your opinion, how much control should the state department of education exercise over the following aspects of education (scale of 1-5)?

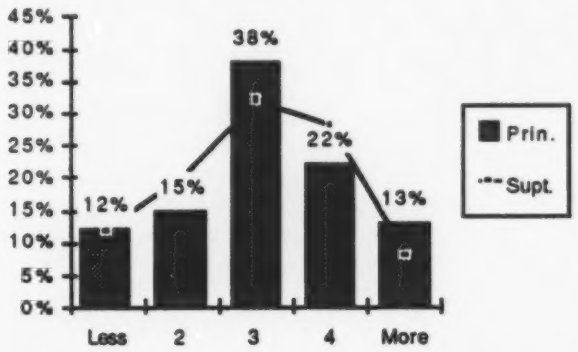
Administrator preparation



On the issue of centralization of curriculum development, responses were fairly evenly split between those who want less control and those calling for more control (Figure 7). Twenty-seven percent of the principals and 32% of the superintendents want less, while 35% of the principals and 36% of the superintendents want more.

Figure 7. In your opinion, how much control should the state department of education exercise over the following aspects of education (scale of 1-5)?

Curriculum development

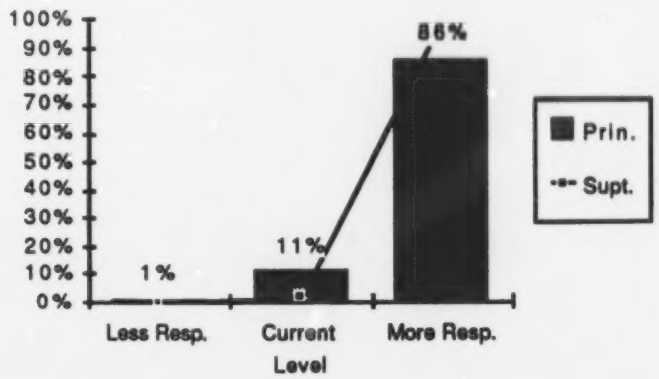


Responsibility for Funding

Debates over the funding of education in South Carolina have, at least at the local level, been frequently acrimonious. Considerable concern is expressed over increasing local cost of education, and school board members have repeatedly expressed a desire to see the state pick up more of the tab for programs it mandates. A similar attitude is expressed by those administrators who responded to the survey: 86% of the principals and a whopping 98% of superintendents indicate that the state should assume more financial responsibility for education (Figure 8). This is hardly surprising, for it is the administrator who is caught each Spring on the firing line in bitter debates by school boards over local millage increases.

A somewhat similar question was recently asked of the South Carolina public (Marion, Ruckman, & Sams, 1990). The researchers wanted to know to whom the burden of educational support should shift, and allowed respondents to choose among the three main levels of support: local, state, and federal. Almost half (47%) said the state should assume the major responsibility for supporting education; the remainder were evenly split between local support (19%) and federal support (23%). Thus it would appear that, although professionals have stronger opinions on the issue of locus of financial support, they and the public have similar dispositions.

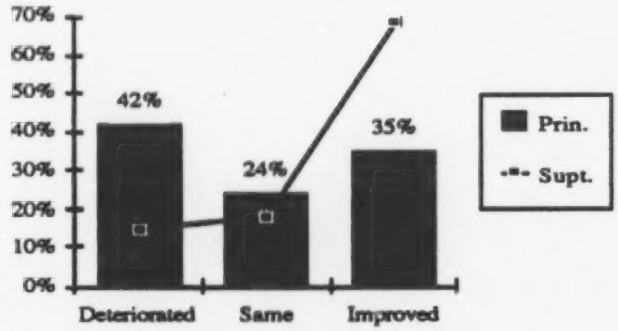
Figure 8. To what degree should the state assume responsibility for funding education?



Morale of Educators

A number of the critics of the excellence movement cite teacher moral as a primary victim of legislative encroachment (see, for example, Deal, 1984). Principals don't necessarily see it that way; those who report improvement in moral (35%) about equal those who see deterioration (42%). Superintendents, on the other hand, are clear in their perception of this issue: 68% see improvements in faculty morale since EIA and only 15% see deterioration (Figure 9).

Figure 9. In your opinion, how does the morale today of the professional educator in South Carolina's public elementary and secondary school compare with that prior to 1984 and the EIA of 1984?



Conclusions

There are weaknesses in the study that should be noted. It is always hazardous to ask subjects to compare current affairs with perceptions of the past. Firstly there is the problem of those who have not been in administration long enough to make appropriate comparisons. Consequently we contrasted the responses of those who entered the administrative position since EIA to those who entered it before EIA, and found no differences. We then looked at experience and found that only five respondents were not

educators in 1984. A second problem with past to present comparisons is that people have jaded perceptions of the past. This we cannot contradict, but would note that it seems human nature to perceive present conditions as less favorable than past, and that has not been the case with this study. A second important weakness regards the absence of teachers from the study. Indeed it would be tenuous to make conclusive statements about the impact of EIA on educational professionals without gauging the opinions of this group. We suggest future study of this concern.

This study would seem to contradict the negative opinions of the critics of the excellence movement. Administrators report improvements in the overall quality of education, the quality of beginning teachers, the level of financial support, and programmatic offerings since the onset of EIA in South Carolina. There has been little negative reaction to increased state control of education and there is strong opinion that the state should increase its financial commitment. Finally, opinion about professional moral is inconclusive, although superintendents cite increases in this area.

The only significant criticism of EIA would seem to regard financing. While administrators report increased funding since 1984, they express concern about the way funding responsibility has been split between local and state sources. A major sore spot of the past decade has been the level of funding responsibility placed on local government. With escalating costs associated with EIA and the inevitable yearly increases associated with the indexing of salaries against Southeastern averages, the heavy local burden is inevitable. Some districts have attempted to challenge this responsibility by refusing to match state-mandated increases, but have been forced to comply. Yearly debate over millage increase is at times quite heated, and many districts finance little more than that minimally mandated by the state. Education and administrators are caught in the middle, and the only solution would seem to be increased state responsibility.

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